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ABSTRACT

Knowledge and application of basic general semantics principles when interviewing the bereaved can heighten social sensitivity, reduce misinterpretations, and minimize misevaluations. General semantics is concerned with the need to make transformations between sensory input and language output more isomorphic. It is an attempt to produce the best possible match between behavior and the facts, between language and reality. It is a system of evaluation based on mental flexibility, and lack of "allness" reactions, and can lead to personal integration and objectivity which come from adequate evaluation. General semantics formulations can improve critical reading/writing skills, enhance self-concept, reduce prejudice, increase creativity, help facilitate effective communication within organizations, increase problem-solving skills while fostering personal-social adjustments, develop critical thinking skills, develop extensional thinking in journalism students, and improve counseling and therapy skills. Some of the basic formulations of general semantics as applied to mass media treatment of the bereaved are: time-binding, critical thinking, intensional orientation, polarization, indiscrimination, non-additivity, and fact-inference confusion. The influence of television reporting is further magnified when faced with the public's fascination with pain and death. General semantics could be fertile ground for training the reporter in matters pertaining to the bereaved. (Fifty-seven notes are included.) (MG)

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That television is a pervasive force in American culture impacting areas from government policy-making to family life is, by now, an understatement. Less certain is the continuing controversy over interpretation of the First Amendment regarding the media's "right" to inform alongside television's obligation toward social responsibility - particularly in the underdeveloped research area of television's reporting of the bereaved. Moreover, a review of the literature, personal interviews with television newsroom directors,[1] and conversations with several colleagues in the radio-television-film discipline revealed a paucity of research into ways of sensitizing the television reporter when interviewing the grief-stricken. To that end, the purpose of this paper is threefold: first, briefly to underscore television's potential influence on the viewer; second, to shed some light on the right-to-privacy issue; and finally, to show how knowledge and application of basic general semantics principles when interviewing the bereaved can heighten social sensitivity, reduce misinterpretations, and minimize misevaluations.

Television's Impact/Influence

Benjamin Stein, a long-time observer of youth and mass culture, in writing of television as a "third parent," offers the

following incontrovertible postulate: American mass culture currently fed by the ubiquitous television set is so powerful, intrusive, and unchecked as a source of values and purveyor of "blankets of security and inadequacy" as to have earned the dubious honor of being called the "third parent."[2]

Estimates are that students, for example, spend more time watching TV than they do in the classroom, some 15,000 hours by high school graduation as compared to 11,000 hours in the schoolroom.[3] Today, this does not seem like a startling statistic. But if world views and belief systems are being shaped more from the unreal world of TV than the "real" world, what are the consequences?

McLuhan has written, "the new fact of TV is that you are there." For example, the Eyewitness News format allows the viewer to share the news with the newscaster.[4] This highly successful format illustrates the underlying structural problems of television news. Failure to understand the consequences of television's structural differences from other media may cause television gatekeepers (newsroom editors) to act out of reflex rather than reason.[5]

Some of these structural differences are: (1) television viewing is simply more intense than any other viewing, (2) the viewer is closer to the actual process of story-gathering, and (3) TV is consumed differently from print news. For example, readers do not have to read stories involving disasters but may

not have much choice in viewing a story shown simultaneously on all 3 major networks (short of hitting the "off" switch).

Television's impact, potential influence and structural differences aside, the literature is replete with the many positive functions of television - to inform, to illuminate, to act as needed catharsis, to inspire, etc., (the voice of Edward R. Murrow heard through-out). Too often, however, television does the opposite: discourages originality, lowers cultural taste, promotes numbing escapism, and sensationalizes personal tragedy to boost ratings under the guise of the public's right-to-know.[6] The latter is perhaps the least researched/understood negative effect of TV viewing, despite recent, widespread public disquietude over this issue.

Right-to-Know vs. Right-to-Privacy

A recent Times Mirror survey indicates that 48% of the public believe the media are unconcerned about the people reported and about 78% believe the media have no regard for people's privacy.[7] In another survey, almost two-thirds of newspaper editors surveyed agreed that journalists take advantage of victims.[8] Ann Seymour, public affairs director for the National Victim Center in Fort Worth comments: "Any time there is a yellow line, some journalist in the interest of news will cross over."[9] In addition, much of the literature on journalism ethics addresses a plethora of questionable practices, implying that the media often goes too far in portraying grief, violence, or matters of personal privacy.

Nothing short of a media circus ensued when local camera crews with microphones followed the families of the 293 U.S. servicemen killed in the Beirut massacre in 1983. The press overwhelmed the waiting, grieving families of the 248 U.S. soldiers who died in a 1985 crash over Newfoundland. Of the Christa McAuliffe funeral after the Challenger exploded in 1986, one writer noted, "The greatest possible abuse of private grief by the national media I've ever seen. They just took over the church and trashed it in a way you'd expect to find at a boxing match".[10]

There is the abhorrent memory of a Pennsylvania treasurer in 1987, with cameras clicking until the unforgettable end, who in the midst of a news conference, placed a .357 magnum in his mouth and pulled the trigger.[11] A reporter and a cameraman, working on a tip, go to a park, and a man waits until their camera is set up, douses himself (several times) with gasoline and ignites his clothes. Cameras roll for 30 seconds before an attempt is made by the reporter to extinguish the flames.[12]

Disaster journalism has too often reared its ugly head: Bhopal, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl.[13] In the area of photojournalism, studies show that those pictures with the greatest drama and impact are most highly valued by the profession.[14] Christians, Rotzoll and Fackler are critical of the photogarapher who ignored request not to shoot pictures of three drowning victims.[15] Hulteng attacks news photos as voyeuristic such as that of an elderly woman throwing herself

across her dying daughter or an 8-year-old looking down at the body of his father killed in a shootout with police.[16] Neither can one forget the often insensitive, irresponsible reporting present after airplane disasters, e.g., the July '89 crash of a DC10 commercial airliner in Sioux City, Iowa (where, as viewed on TV by this writer, reporters with open microphones and cameras rolling are seen racing after family members of victims asking "How do you FEEL?").

There are, of course, legitimate arguments to justify the coverage of victims of tragedy.[17] The extensive coverage of the Vietnam war, for example, shocked Americans into the realization of the costliness of this "police action." The danger of religious cults was never made more apparent than when TV reported detailed and graphic events of the mass suicide at Jonestown. Victims, themselves, have expressed appreciation for TV's coverage of personal tragedy.[18] In fact, some studies indicate only a small degree of difference between the graphic nature of television reporting and what the public wants to see.[19] Even vocal critics like Hulteng have admitted (with major reservations) that much of the time journalists' responses to these extraordinary occupational challenges are "well-considered and defensible..."[20] Moreover, and to be considered, is the media's unique constitutional prerogatives embodied by the First Amendment to meet the public's need (right?)-to-know.

Still, the viewer is hard-pressed to find similar newsworthy reasons of great social-political significance to justify the

public exposure of the victims' grieving survivors. This, in spite of the fact that the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists and the Statement of Principles of the American Society of Newspaper Editors[21] and The Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters[22] stress the rights of privacy of the bereaved as well as emphasizing the importance of good tastes and the avoidance of sensational information. Neither of these codes, however, provides specific guidelines for dealing with grief-stricken victims.

In fact, the phrase, "television ethics" has been referred to as an oxymoron. Furthermore, Cooper, in a recent review of the literature in television ethics states that television ethics is significantly less rigorous and organized than print journalism and has only recently begun to "rival print journalism ethics as a field of serious discussion in size and scope, if not in organization and rigor."[23]

This apparent conundrum has been graphically pinpointed by Greenfield who writes that journalists wave the first amendment "the way a diplomat uses his passport when he's stopped for drunken driving - a way to claim immunity from the consequences of what we do."[24]

While the media has been given significant license in defining newsworthiness, does a person need to be part of an audience to someone else's private grief. Media advocates are correct to assert the public's right to know but do media defenders/practitioners have the moral or ethical right to

broadcast bereavement? At least in print journalism, a recent survey indicates overwhelming approval for increased attention to the privacy rights of victims.[25]

In addition, Anderson asserts that victims do have privacy rights in certain situations: if the victim can prove the broadcaster was negligent in disclosing the information, the information was "extreme and outrageous," or that the disclosure was not a matter of public interest.[26] However, the courts are not likely to protect the bereaved from unwanted publicity. Victims are more likely to be vindicated by means other than legal redress. For instance, entreaties to common decency by victims to broadcasters are routinely disregarded; ABC news analyst, George Will, has vividly referred to this practice as the "pornography of grief."

Christians, Rotzoll, and Fackler suggests three moral principles that would create an ethics of privacy for media people: (1) to act with human decency and basic fairness, (2) that only information of redeeming social value be disclosed, and (3) that personal dignity not be sacrificed for press privilege.[27] These principles, of course, are magnanimous in intent but difficult to put in practice and obviously call for special sensitivity on the part of the reporter - a kind of sensitivity that may be learned via exposure to germane communication principles.

Practicing journalists, academicians, and victims have all supported the idea of special training for reporters charged with

the responsibility of interviewing the bereaved,[28] a responsibility that should go beyond a commercial interest in catastrophe. The remainder of this paper will address itself to foundational tenets within the general semantics discipline that may lay the groundwork for appropriate training in this area.

GENERAL SEMANTICS APPROACH

General semantics training might prove to be particularly useful in helping the reporter more accurately "map the territory" while simultaneously showing proper deference to the bereaved. Application of general semantics principles has proved helpful in many areas.

General semantics is concerned with the need to make transformations between sensory input and language output more isomorphic. It is an attempt to produce the best possible match between behavior and the facts, between language and reality. General semantics is not a way of believing but a system of evaluation based on mental flexibility, lack of allness reactions, and can lead to personal integration and objectivity which comes from adequate evaluations.

General semantics formulations can improve critical reading/writing skills,[29] enhance self-concept,[30] reduce prejudice,[31] increase creativity,[32] help facilitate effective communication within organizations,[33] increase problem-solving skills while fostering personal-social adjustments,[34] develop critical thinking skills, [35] develop extensional thinking in

journalism students,[36] and improve counseling and therapy skills.[37]

Only some of the basic formulations of general semantics as conceived and explicated by Alfred Korzybski[38] and his students[39] are mentioned here. From this body of work, some suggestions are offered for making TV reporting of the bereaved more comprehensible and less reprehensible.

Time-Binding. General semantics define humans as time-binders, communicators across generations, with language as the tool of time-binding. Drawing from the knowledge of our accumulated PAST, humans invent, renew, create through the PRESENT to prepare for the FUTURE and its survival. While television has characteristics of this time-binding vitality, its earlier mentioned structural qualities can present a false-to-fact picture to the viewer, impeding the cultural accumulation aspect of time-binding. Only fragmentary bits of reality (e.g., the experience of bereavement) are often the result of camera angle and sound overlays, the editing room, selective filtering of production people and anchorpersons, news costs and news profits,[40] logistics, and the news selection process itself (i.e., a "slow news day"). For example, barring a news story of significant import, news stories typically air from ten seconds to three minutes,[41] time-binding a viewer's understanding of reality into a simplistic, unsophisticated view of life's crises and solutions. Further, through the magic of TV cameras with their color, light, and zooming capabilities, scenes of personal

tragedy are instantaneously transposed into our living rooms - space-binding the viewer into a false sense of event comprehension - much the way a cartographer might misformulate a map of the territory.[42] General semanticists would ask the reporter to develop a heightened sense of awareness of how TV can enhance our time-binding (cooperative, cumulative) behaviors. For example, sensory awareness may be increased by allowing the roving eye of the camera to dominate the reporter's verbal account, an account where the structure of the reporter's language may bias his assumptions and evaluations of the bereaved. In doing so, the silent level allows for a more isomorphic relationship between the map (the viewer's mental picture) and the territory (the televised scene of bereavement). Familiarity with Bois' three steps of time-binding may be helpful to the reporter concerned with cultivating a special responsiveness to the inconsolable in a way that does not simply replicate a prior less sensitive approach (ineffective time-binding): (1) question the value of what you know or do, (2) invent something new that holds promise of being an improvement, and (3) criticize that invention by the test of experiment[43] (for the reporter, this might mean devoting more time critically evaluating his/her product).

Critical Thinking. Some have argued that expressions of grief are not newsworthy, i.e., the question of HOW the personal tragedy occurred is newsworthy but reporters should never ask grieving sources how they FEEL about the loss. Others feel that

psychological scarring can occur from NOT expressing your feelings, or that the public has a right (need?) to know, or that live, gripping, emotional dramatic images deserve to be seen to confirm the value of "reality" television, or that others will learn from this incident particularly in the case of accidental tragedy (the "warning bell" theory).

From a general semantics perspective, the question is, "To what extent does the reporter employ an extensional vs. an intensional (egocentric) orientation during the interview?" Focusing on WHY a tragedy occurred may not be as important as HOW it happened in terms of the potential for reducing this kind of incident in the future. Critical thinking skills are of paramount importance, here. Pace has written:

> Critical and creative thinking evolves from an understanding and utilization of abstracting from lower levels to higher levels with checking. It does not take place by dead-level abstracting. Often the focus can be misplaced on the causality (whyness) of the electro-chemical levels rather than on the non-verbal 'object' level where pre-reflection is constituted. Delaying ones reactions serves to bracket structures of identification and low quality semantic reactions thereby encouraging one to formulate understandings and solutions (creativity) at various levels of abstraction and, perchance, to change behaviors as appropriate."

For the reporter assigned the task of interviewing a grieving person, sensitivity skills would be heightened by assuming this pre-reflective stance. General semanticists believe that language is only a conceptual tool. We need to concentrate more on "existences" or realities as they exist at the silent or nonverbal level. The advice here is to go slow and check out the territory.

If interviewing the victim at home, make note of family artifacts, use your notebook only to recall pertinent facts or details, avoid inappropriate delving into the victims past, observe the victims right to speak off-the-record. Whatever is shared by the victim may be words that have lost their moorings. In other words, encourage correspondence between what is reported and what is known. If at a funeral or cite of tragedy, the reporter would do well to first embrace the "silent level" - the first order of abstraction or non-verbal level - the most important level for feeling, sensing, observing, and experiencing the territory as it exists apart from the often false-to-fact mental maps in our heads. Of course, verbalization prior to observation is at times important and often, for the reporter pressured by deadlines, unavoidable. Whenever possible, however, the reporter is encouraged to be self-reflexive - to self-report on his reportings - otherwise, there is the risk of acting in a conditionED versus a conditionAL way: where life (reporting) facts are reduced to slogans, cliches, and platitudes that obviate thought, dull the senses, and evaluates human tragedy by "signal" reactions. Maslow writes, "Language, then, has in truth the function of concealing thought rather than of communicating it."[45] At a scene of tragedy, reporters who spend more time observing BEFORE talking are apt to better identify the "leaders," people best able to cope and answer questions asked in a discreet way.

ETC. - The structure of our language contributes to the problem of allness where two false assumptions occur: one, the belief that omniscience about any one subject is possible, and, two, the notion that what is spoken or written about includes all that is important about the subject. This selection-omission act of information is referred to as abstracting and can lead to dogmatic, categorical statements unless the reporter develops consciousness of abstracting. The old adage from William James comes to mind: "The word 'and' trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes." It is not uncommon, for example, for obituary columns in newspapers to include the job title of the deceased in the headline and abstract out many other roles, attributes, characteristics, accomplishments, etc., of this person (none of which are included in the obit.). This problem is particularly acute for the television reporter following up on a news headline that reads "BODY IDENTIFIED AS TWENTY-YEAR-OLD WAITRESS" - who in this real-life account," had only been a part-time waitress for a month but was also a student, an insurance clerk, a loving daughter, a friend to many, etc. For the reporter who, like ALL of us, inescapably abstracts when on the job, to be conscious of abstracting means to evaluate the quality of abstractions more judicously, and, if necessary, make subsequent adjustments in the report - to, at least silently acknowledge the "etcetera" when abstracting. This is a reminder that what is being talked about and viewed by the reporter and the television audience is in process.

Polarization - When contraries are believed to be contradictories, where there is absence of middle ground when, in fact, some exist, and when situations involving gradations are treated in an either-or way, then polarization is present. The question should be not only - can a television station show coverage of the bereaved but - SHOULD it? And if shown, at what point in the newscast; on which day; should the dead body be shown, the body bag, or a chalk outline; the police; a grieving family member? These are only a few considerations that go beyond journalistic craft to ethical considerations and reporting sensitivity. It is, of course, impossible not to slice up the world as the reporter sees it, but limiting yourself to just two choices further distorts the reality, particularly, when qualifiers are eschewed.

Intensional Orientation - Reporters should be asked to avoid the tendency to view the world simply in the way it is talked about or labeled. In general semantics terms, this is a reversal of the natural order of evaluation: facts first, words second. The bereaved should be thought of as thinking, feeling, self-moving, electro-chemically charged human organisms with the mementum of their accumulated past, their expectations of the future, and present conditions." When reporters are guided by their senses first, and labels, second, making signal, undelayed, and impulsive evaluations is minimized. For example, it is not rational to believe that a cause and effect relationship exists between showing drowning, fire, and crime victims in a state of

heart rendering bereavement and that, as a result, death by drownings, fires, and murder will cease. In this case, the word (or television picture) is not the thing. To be wary of the "is" of identity is to guard against confusing verbal or pictorial representations with actual events. Furthermore, it is not enough to say that the television of grief-stricken victims will have the effect of reducing similar future tragedies when more substantive, media-sponsored, long term programs (e.g., launching editorial campaigns, sponsoring community programs, etc.) might better serve television's social responsibilities.

Indiscrimination - General semanticists refer to this problem of mis-evaluation as "hardening of the categories." One who stereotypes applies group characteristics to each member of that group, denying individual uniqueness. Important differences are disregarded in favor of a fixed, mental set where only similarities are emphasized. This behavior results in identical reactions to all individuals to which the same name has been given - in this case, the "bereaved." The reporter may be prone to evaluate with faulty analogies, too quick to pigeonhole bereaved victim A with bereaved victim B. Categorizations, generalizations, and classifications are imperative in today's world - that is how we grapple with complexity but as historians have written, over-simplification is often the essence of tyranny. It is better to incorporate the mental device of "indexing" where adequate emphasis to differences in disaster situations is attained. In turn, this may help stave off a basic

criticism of television: television is accused of creating a climate of opinion where the media acts as if they have their own political, social, and personal agenda and proceed to disseminate information to support that private agenda," disregarding contrary opinion.

Non-Additivity - We know from systems theory that a system is not only a collection of parts but contains parts that are inextricably interrelated and interdependent. Littlejohn reminds us that this interdependence is easily illustrated by families." Behaviors within a family are not independent but patterned; moreover, each member is both constrained and defined by the others. This active interchange creates homeostasis and makes change, adaptability, and control possible. For people in grief, experiencing the loss of a close family member seriously disrupts the family system and, at least, temporarily activates entropic factors. Additively speaking, the bereaved are not merely minus one close family member but are undergoing uncertainty, self-doubts, anger, confusion, wide mood swings, insecurity, deep pain, and may be ambivalent about whether their own lives are worth saving.[50] Time, patience, and understanding are needed to first experience the loss fully as an organism-as-a-whole in a mind-body sense prior to acceptance and reinvestment in a healthy, productive life. In Korzybskian terms, the experience of the bereaved is one that is not merely superimposed over a current tragedy but is an integrated part of the process of bereavement where the bereaveds' emotional energies are hopefully

redirected to what was, to what is, and what can be in a time-binding sense (from the past to the present to the future). An empathic appearing television interview with the bereaved is far more likely if the reporter's knowledge based is transfused with the literature on the bereaved and interfaced with general semantic principles. In this way, synergistic effects may not be sacrificed for televised sensationalism.

Fact-Inference Confusion - Another pattern of miscommunication is the inference-observation confusion. Weinberg states that "a factual statement can be defined as a descriptive statement made after observation (which includes any sensory perception) and verifiable by accepted standards."[51] Facts approach certainty, inferences only probability. Facts may only be about the past or present while inferences refer to the future also. There is nothing inherently wrong with making inferences. Inferences, says Haney, are "an inescapable part of living in an active world."[52] However, misevaluation occurs when reporters ACT as though inferences were facts, resulting in a non-isomorphic relationship between the map and the territory. For example, for the disaster/tragedy journalist, false speculation often stems from: poor choice of sources (avoid the poorly qualified "expert"), the single-cause fallacy (when a multiplicity of factors created the tragedy), the rush to get the "big scoop" where verification of information becomes secondary, the need to find a villain or scapegoat where one does not exist, and an over-reliance on unnamed sources breeding rumor, innuendo, and

mistrust on the part of the viewer - are all but a few of the complaints/problems television reporting of the bereaved needs to address. Levy and Robinson suggest several strategies for making the news more comprehensible, and by implication, heightening awareness of the distinctions to be made between an inference and a fact: minimize usage of jargon and/or explain complex terms beyond the comprehension of the average viewer, slow down the anchor's delivery, repeat key bits of information, use visual aids to reinforce the spoken words, make sure narration matches the pictures (for example, Challenger salvage ships bobbing in the sea, oil rigs in Texas, possibly capped, never to pump again, reports of Contra guerillas under fire, etc., went wanting for narrative facts and/or sound inferences), and a statement of important facts justifying reporting on and showing of a story (the "so-what" test)." Again, the aim, here, is not the avoidance of inferences but the AWARENESS of inferring. The chief function of science, afterall, is theory-building. From a general semantics perspective, the advice is to check the territory: detect the inference (Did I make the observation? Did my statement stay with and not exceed my observation? Did I make the statement during or after but not before my observation?), calculate the risk (the assessment of the probability that the inference is correct), get more data (to improve the quality of my risk), recalculate the risk (affirm that the risk is a safe one), and label your inferences (to recognize the difference

between what reporters know to be true and what they think they know).[54]

Summary

We live in a time of omnipresent sound bytes, audio bytes and visual images - a time where tools of indoctrination, primarily television, are so powerful and diffuse that understanding the logic and impact of these images is paramount. The influence of television reporting is further magnified when faced with the public's fascination with pain and death, a haunting and unsettling notion - a notion that cries out for a dialogue on ethics and sensitivity training in both the newsroom and the classroom.

Future research might probe the method whereby these and other general semantics strategies might be processed. The work done by Pace, a contemporary general semanticist, in the area of general semantics and role-playing,[55] is fertile ground for training the television reporter in matters pertaining to the bereaved. Interpersonal communication problems involving the television reporter and the grief-stricken might be enacted, preceded by non-verbal participation exercises and followed by individual group member processing at the descriptive level (often, self-reflexively, where remarks of remarks are operating) first. Evaluative or inferential remarks are then solicited at higher levels of abstraction. As feelings at the lower levels and inferences about these feelings at higher levels are

experienced and shared by all group members, insights, possible solutions, and other-directedness are often the result.

The role of general semantics as presented here in regards to television reporting of the bereaved is both partial and incomplete. Yet, general semantics remains a rational methodology that can reduce misevaluations produced by the structure of our language. General semantics ideas and methods when efficaciously applied can result in personal and/or professional growth and, in particularly, can become "a powerful aid in helping to gather information more accurately, evaluate it more clearly, judge it more soundly, and act upon it more successfully."[54]

For television and television reporting with its vast, visual representations, the problem of non-verbal levels of evaluation is just one aspect of an overall pattern of evaluation at all levels of abstraction that general semantics addresses whereby objectivity, accuracy, and fairness can be fostered. Some years ago, Weinberg, a noted general semanticist, in his book, Levels of Knowing and Existence, and writing about the problems of communication and language structure, penned a cogent summary statement of general semantics that ends with a comment about the "inquiring eye" - an eye that, today, could (should?) belong to the television reporter:

> The complexity and variety of daily events does necessitate some selection and condensation. Nevertheless, an awareness on our part that something important probably has been left out, that distortion and bias most likely are present, can perhaps, diminish the chances of a misevaluation of important events.

The deliberate and constant use of semantic devices helps to provoke and maintain the vitally important awareness of the dangers of oversimplification, dogmatism, and static-mindedness, and aids in the development of that sophisticated innocence which enables us to look with a fresh and inquiring eye upon the world around us."

ENDNOTES

1. The writer wishes to express his gratitude for the able and enthusiastic library and field research conducted for this paper by Shirley Whitfield, a Fall '89 M. A. graduate in Speech Communication at Northeast Louisiana University.

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